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Student voice in higher education: the importance of distinguishing student representation and student partnership

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Abstract

Student representation and student partnership differ and the difference matters. To further scholarly understanding of, and appreciation for, the important difference between the two, we examine these two commonly evoked conceptions for student voice in higher education. We draw on two points of difference—responsibility and access—to illuminate conceptualisations and discourses of each in the current literature. In doing so, we clarify the unique contributions of each, shaped by differing contexts of interaction, and articulate issues arising by confounding and conflating partnership and representation in the name of student voice. Advancing an argument for an ecosystem of student participation grounded in student voice, we warn of the harm in positioning student partners as speaking for other students and the risk of diminishing the importance of elected student representation systems in favour of staff selected student partner models of student representation.

Keywords Student voice · Student partnership · Student representation · Higher education · Students as partners

Introduction

> *And some of the continuing dilemmas about 'who' and 'in what' remain: the ideas of inclusivity and authenticity.* Roger Holdsworth (2021, p. 8)

The argument that students have an authentic and valuable voice in the decisions that impact their learning and education has become a phenomenon known as 'student voice'. Reflecting on forty years of editing a practitioner-focused journal, mainly focused on compulsory schooling but with connections to higher education practices, Roger Holdsworth (2021) articulated a long-standing tension of 'student representation' as a legitimate practice of student voice. Yet the exclusivity built into the structure of many student representation systems means that, as year 11 student Jasmine Xu (in Holdsworth, 2021, p. 32)

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reflected, 'not everyone can be in one of these positions (elected student rep)… Many of us want to make change. But not everyone can'. Questions of inclusion and in what activities students can be genuinely involved have led to calls for student partnership that renew decades-old calls for student voice.

Alison Cook-Sather (2002, p.3) asserted in her seminal piece, *Authorizing students' perspectives*, the commitment to student voice involves a change in mindset to 'count students among those who have the knowledge and the position to shape what counts as education, to reconfigure power dynamics and discourse practices within existing realms of conversation about education, and to create new forums', spaces where students speak for themselves. The term student voice—a metaphor to unsettle and provoke a new conversation about educational reform in compulsory schooling—emerged as an inspiration for change, an aspiration for a different educational future for children, and a complex construct to translate into practice and policy at the multiple levels of classroom, school management, and state/government. As a contested and widely debated concept spanning theory and practice, this discourse of student voice has translated from the school sector to higher education through configurations of new and existing forms of participation, two of which are commonly captured in the terms: student representation and student partnership.

Because of the growing attention to advancing student voice in higher education through student partnership and/or student representation, in this paper, we examine the overlapping and entangled discourse of student partnership (usually related to teaching and learning) and student representation (typically associated with governance). First, we move beyond the common-sense usage of each term—where 'representing' is evoked when students, in their official capacity as students, speak on behalf of other students or one student speaks for many students, and where 'partnering' is espoused to signal that students can collaborate or work together with teachers and staff to achieve the mutually beneficial goal of better teaching and learning. Second, we select two points of difference—responsibility and access—to examine the qualitative variation between them. While both partnership and representation share a commitment to student voice as a participatory process advancing democratic education, they are different and related roles in the ecosystem of student voice efforts.

Student voice through student representation

In the past 50 years, student representation has been cemented by the state or governing university bodies to provide student voice on policymaking or quality assurance (Klemenčič, 2012a; Naylor et al., 2020). In Europe, student representation is now considered one of the key principles of the European Higher Education Area (Klemenčič, 2012b). Flint and Goddard (2021) use the term 'student academic representation systems' to describe the current model of student participation in university governance with 'elected or selected' student representatives speaking and acting on behalf of their peers. The benefits of student representation are manifold: the practice of democracy in universities that encourage active citizenship amongst students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010); enhancement of educational quality through the inclusion of student voice in university governance (Douglas et al., 2008); and growth of capabilities and skillsets of student representatives (Flint, Goddard, & Russell, 2017). Yet the boundaries of what constitutes a student academic representation system differ by

country, context, structure, and culture with a fuzzy middle ground between representation and participation. The common thread across the landscape of representation is the idea of collective responsibility.

For Flint and Goddard (2021) in the UK, inclusion is broad ranging from elected student unionism to informally elected or invited class reps at the subject level, and an array of roles in-between whereby students are involved in committee and governance structures with academic or administrative staff focused on improving quality of the student experience, including 'Faculty Student Council' models (Flint & O'Hara, 2013). In Spain, 'that university departments give more responsibility to the students in activities concerning them, involve them in problems related to the budget and physical resources, and have them participate in setting standards' is core to how Planas and co-authors (2011, p. 573) framed student representation. Cheng (2019, p. 59) found that student representation in Chinese universities involved a system of committees, unions, and institutional governance with student representatives being 'either "event host" or "errands runner" to fulfil the administrative needs of the university'. Regardless of boundaries and scope, there is broad implementation of student academic representation systems across higher education institutions.

The tensions between managerialist approaches for quality assurance and socio-political commitments to democracy and citizenship are raised by scholars, typically linking student engagement, student participation, and student representation (Carey, 2013; Holen et al., 2021). There are growing calls from student unions, who are focused on the relationship of student representatives with university administrations, for student voice and student partnership. In the UK, the national Office for Students has established to 'meaningfully engage with students as partners' across the sector on matters of widening access and participatory activities with students, particularly 'diverse voices and collaboration with student unions' (Islam, Burnett, & Collins, 2021, p. 77). Student representation through student unions is a complex political entanglement.

Student voice through student partnership

Students as partners (SaP) in learning and teaching is an umbrella term (capturing or associated with terms including pedagogical partnership, learner-teacher partnership, co-creation) with historical threads in the K-12 student voice moment in the 1990s (Cook-Sather, 2018). It has since, however, become increasingly popular in the higher education sector, and we use the term student partnership in this paper to refer to the broad conception of SaP or pedagogical partnership. The approach repositions students as passive recipients in learning to co-producers, co-designers, or co-creators (McCulloch, 2009). Rather than a product or program, student partnership has been described as a process of engagement, where students, academics, professional staff, senior managers, and student representatives work together on educational efforts that unfold both in and out of the classroom (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). Thus, who students can partner with becomes important to appreciate. In SaP or student partnership, the term:

> explicitly names "students" to intentionally and clearly assert the role students can assume alongside others with educational expertise, partnerships can involve: students with students, students with staff, students with senior university administrators, and students with alumni or members of industry. (Matthews, 2017, p. 1)

The relationship between engagement and partnership is not clear cut, yet there are means to discern questions of process and quality of student participation imagined as either or both (see Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Holden et al., 2021). In the vein of Klemenčič and Ashwin (2015), we acknowledge the tension of literatures in the arena of teaching and learning, particularly the diverging and converging lens of psychological and sociological scholarship brought to bear on learning and student development in higher education. Cook-Sather's theorisation of student voice sets a direction for partnership, and thus engagement, rooted in critical educational studies situated in sociological scholarship yet with a focus on individual learners as active agents in learning and society.

Of the significant number of empirical studies that have been conducted on student partnership, the majority report numerous benefits to both students and staff, and the university. Reported in a systematic literature review, these include increased student motivation, increased student and staff belonging and engagement, student perceptions of learning, a new sense of identity of what it means to be a student or teacher, and enhanced student-staff relationships (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Increasingly, questions are emerging about who is, or which students are, involved in these beneficial partnership activities as studies find student partnership can promote greater equity and inclusion (Marquis et al., 2021).

In a review of literature to explore the theoretical underpinnings of student partnership, Matthews and co-authors (2019) found an intersection of several constructs and metaphors evoked to make sense of partnership with threads of power and identity underlying (often implicitly) changing pedagogical relationships. The theory–practice nexus in the student partnership literature arises from the applied nature of pedagogical and curricular research where student partnership is often conceptualised as a set of values or guiding propositions, rather than as a specific practice or program. For example, Matthews (2017) presented five propositions to underpin genuine partnership practices. By naming values and propositions, the intent is to frame student partnership as a wide array of practices involving students.

Illuminating points of difference to further understand student voice in higher education

Efforts to translate the ethos and aspirations of student voice into practice in dynamic and complex higher education settings require, as Holen and co-authors (2021, p. 10) recently asserted, the 'need to apply multiple models if we are to understand partnership practices'. Thought-through conceptions underpin effective models seeking to capture and reflect dynamic processes and practices in a diversity of educational contexts. Our contribution, responding to the call of Holen and co-authors (2021), is to examine and distinguish two commonly evoked conceptions of student voice—student representation and student partnership—to further scholarly understanding of, and appreciation for, the important difference between the two.

We draw on two points of difference (from several possible points of difference)—responsibility and access—to illuminate conceptualisations and discourses of each. Through an analysis of the current literature on student partnership and student representation in the largely practitioner-focused and applied research orientation of teaching and learning scholarship in higher education, we clarify the unique contributions of each by articulating issues arising by confounding and conflating partnership and representation

in the name of student voice. Our intention was not to conduct an exhaustive or systematic literature review, but rather to select literature that illuminates the qualitative variation between discourses of each, extending the approach of Matthews et al. (2021) with a co-authorship team inclusive of scholars spanning the two literatures.

Responsibility: student partnership

Explicit in student partnership literature is the responsibility of students to contribute to teaching and learning *with* teachers (and teaching specialist staff), to student life *with* staff (including teachers), to disciplinary knowledge creation *with* researchers, and to teaching, learning, and student life *with* fellow students (Healey et al., 2014; Matthews, 2017; Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018). Thus, the partnership values of shared responsibility, mutual respect, and reciprocity are often evoked by practitioners and scholars. For example, reciprocity and responsibility speak to 'the give and take of reciprocity and… how partnership work changes student and faculty orientation toward responsibility…' and 'through partnership, students now have some responsibility for pedagogy and faculty share some responsibility for learning' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p.5). Typically framed in pedagogical contexts, with US scholars referring to faculty members, the responsibility of student partners is contributing their individual perspectives as students experiencing the educational curriculum, which are unique to students and could be of benefit to teachers who seek to create more meaningful learning opportunities (Bovill et al., 2011). Therefore, the shared responsibility of students and university educators collaborating in partnership is attentive to learning that is socially situated.

When students and academics reflect on the process of sharing responsibility, they often talk about the challenges associated with negotiating their 'new' responsibilities, and note the change in mindset that occurs. Students who engaged in a pedagogical partnership in a study by Enright and colleagues (2017, p. 468) reflected:

> We share responsibility for making this work. It's not all on [the academic] if an idea flops…. It makes us more likely to turn-up for class prepared to work. (Derek)
> We got listened to about our perspectives on the [course] and I think we were more involved and learned more because of it. (Ann)

Similarly, the academic involved noted:

> My reflection was being structured around what the students were saying so...I felt more accountable...I was forced to reflect on my practices because I had to go back to the students and either change my practice based on what they said or explain to them the reasons why I wasn't going to make changes…

Scholars are beginning to reframe assessment and feedback practices as a form of partnership that draws on the discourse of shared responsibility (Bovill, Matthews, & Hinchcliffe, 2021). When practiced outside of the class, mainly through project-based programs, the aims can have a quality assurance bent (to enhance the student experience) or skills-building intent (to build student employability by involving students in the work of the university) as student partners with professional or administrative staff (Woods & Homer, 2021).

The omnipresent thread running throughout learner-teacher partnership literature is one of seeing responsibility differently—imagining new possibilities 'further reconceptualised through sharing responsibility for the co-creation of learning environments, curriculum,

assessment, and more' (Cook-Sather, in press). Through partnership processes where students and teacher engage in acts of co-creation through dialogic processes, the role boundaries (labels) blur as teachers become learners, and learners become teachers (Cook-Sather, 2010), well-captured by Cook-Sather et al., (2014, p. 5):

> One faculty member captured the connections between reciprocity and responsibility this way: "participating in this project gave me a sense of students being able and wanting to take certain pedagogical responsibility, and the counter of that is me taking a learning responsibility".

Responsibility: student representation

Many student representatives are responsible for representing and defending the interests of the collective student body (Flint, Goddard & Russell, 2017; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Klemenčič, 2012a), which could include all students or being a representative for an identifiable group of students (e.g., disciplinary group, a class, particular cohort of students). Recent literature typically frames student representatives as agents of quality assurance who gather, analyse, and report on feedback from peers on the quality of learning experiences or the student experience through formal university governance structures (Flint, Goddard & Russell, 2017; Klemenčič, 2012a). Expected in this conceptualisation of responsibility is that student representatives 'speak' and 'act' on behalf of the collective student body to communicate the experiences of their peers (Carey, 2013; Flint & Goddard, 2020). This role is captured in a study of female student representatives in Uganda as one student explained, 'I always take up views from students, which gives them a voice on the highest decision-making organ in the University. I always consulted them, asked for their opinions on various issues that affect them' (Mayanja, 2020, p. 125).

Student representative as agents of and for quality assurance is common in the current literature and is increasingly formalised in policy. For example, in Australia, with the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), there began a national effort to mandate (what was an existing practice of) student representation through university governance on academic boards or university councils. Thus, student representative is one component of quality assurance frameworks along with a structure of student feedback via surveys at institutional, degree program, and subject levels (Gvaramadze, 2008).

Yet, student representatives often face challenges in their ability to carry out their roles and responsibilities. In Australian research, Lizzio and Wilson (2009, p. 72) found that student representatives frequently suffered from role strain—'student representatives are unsure what is expected of them (role ambiguity) or hold differing expectations to institutional management (role conflict)', which they attributed to lack of university management transparency. In the UK, Ireland and co-authors (2021, p.3) found that students in governance have 'the difficult position of being expected to participate both as an impartial individual board member and as a representative of the study body'. On the other hand, the ability to extend representative roles into other informal roles, such as pedagogical consultancy, can also be seen as an opportunity, as reflected by Kapadia (2021).

The challenges of being a student representative are discussed in terms of training in quality assurance activities, but there is also a role and/or responsibility related to advocacy or activism through student unionism. Islam, Burnett, and Collins (2021) reported that student unions (or student guilds) are present at almost all public universities in the UK with student officers who represent the student body and have various roles, including advice

and advocacy functions, delivery of welfare support, equality, and diversity. Through advocacy, student representatives are seen as more able to understand and identify more quickly issues of student inequality and exclusion than university management.

But the relationship between student unions and university management is often complex and changing. For example, Mugume and Luescher (2015) wrote how a Student Representative Committee (SRC) at the University of Western Cape played a pivotal role in helping fight for subsidised student housing for a recently opened private accommodation close to campus for disadvantaged students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. At times through this struggle, the students were supported by the university, and yet later when the subsidy was achieved, 'nowhere in the [University's] annual report was there any mention of the SRC's role in initiating or arriving in the decision' (ibid, p.13). Student representatives through student unions often navigate activism, quality assurance, and securing resources, as they act on behalf of a diverse student body.

Discussing roles and responsibility in student partnership and student representation

While the nature of student partnership—encompassing an array of practices and motivated by a pluralism of commitments—is contested (Godbold, et al, 2021), the discourse of shared responsibility is often explicit in literature and practice. Thus, partnership is ultimately a relational pedagogy that works because students share responsibility for learning, teaching, and educational endeavours with teachers/staff/administrators and each other. For Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014), the flourishing of student partnership practices is part of a larger institutional culture that values 'partnered learning communities' and can involve all students. In other words, student partnership is challenging the higher education sector to rethink the place, role, and responsibility of students to ensure students are active agents in shaping university communities. Thus, partnership demands that students see themselves as more than just students who are passive consumers, and that teaching staff relinquish fixed notions of control to enable students to play more active roles in their own educational experiences.

The discourse of responsibility in student representation is qualitatively different from that of student partnership with far more emphasis on the utility of students' roles in structured and established governance systems. The intent is for student representatives to be in the system as a student giving voice to the views of the student body to inform decision-making. Through representing the views of their peers as part of quality assurance activities or policies, being 'just a student', although a vocal and articulate representative of students sometimes called a student leader, is crucial. The weight of responsibility of a student representative is not shared, nor are governance structures designed to be spaces of learning and partnership. The role of the student representative is shaped by the power and politics of a rigid and often well-defined system that unpins institutional decision-making at a strategic level. Student partnership has different opportunities shaping the roles of students with more scope given it is at an operational or everyday level of educational interactions. As a result of different contexts in the university system, student partners are primarily responsible for engaging in reciprocal learning processes where they co-create the agenda, aims, and activities. In doing so, their student identities become blurred as they take on new responsibilities with a new sense of agency in a partnership with staff/teachers (Godbold et al, 2021).

The utilitarian notion of student representatives' responsibilities and contributions is further congruent with the historical roots of student representation, which often was enacted to protect the rights of students and defend the interests of the student body. In this vein, student representatives are more commonly seen as evaluators or committee members with the expectation that they are to advocate for the interests of their peers (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Naylor et al., 2021). Thus, student representation can sometimes involve an adversarial stance of 'us versus them' in the complex politics of institutional governance. In student partnership, the responsibilities between students and staff are shared and mutually dependent upon one another to break down 'us versus them' mentality between students and staff (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Therefore, while both representation and partnership are social endeavours, partnership places greater emphasis on the dynamic and ever-evolving context of the learning environment, while representation, with a focus on attending meetings and committee motions and minutes, seeks more to document and improve in a system to maintain a steady-state, rather than explore and expand ways of being and doing in higher education.

Access: student partnership

A key project for the scholarly student partnership community is understanding how all students can be involved in processes of partnership that move universities further down the pathway of being equalitarian learning communities (Matthews, Cook-Sather & Healey, 2018). In practice, many universities have adopted an extra-curricular, project-based model to implement partnership practices (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Therefore, it is unsurprising that student partnership is overwhelmingly positioned as, or assumed to be, a small-scale activity with selected students. In such models, students are informally invited, or they apply through a formal process with staff, or a student-staff committee, selecting students (Oleson & Hovakimyan, 2017). However, Marquis and co-authors (2018) have argued that extra-curricular and typically small group partnership practices too often rely on very engaged, often academically high-achieving students, who have access to capital and the time to participate. Thus, a growing number of scholars are advocating for an expansive view of student partnership whereby all spaces in universities can become pedagogical or learning spaces involving students as partners (Bovill, 2017; Dwyer, 2018). For example, partnership can unfold in the assessed curriculum—what Bovill (2020) called co-creation of learning and teaching or Godbold et al. (2021) named the partnership classroom. In many ways, the inclusion of partnership practices in the classroom is an argument for inclusion and equity.

The focus on equity and inclusion arises from concerns that without deliberate attention, design, and evaluative lens, student partnership will favour like students and like staff (Matthews, 2017) that excludes students historically marginalised in educational systems (Bindra et al., 2018) or further privileges particular students with high levels of social and cultural capital in universities (Dwyer, 2018). Scholars are examining cross-cultural partnership practices (Zhang, Matthews, & Lui, in press), learner-teacher partnerships across Chinese universities (Liang & Matthews, 2021), students with disabilities and survivors through a Mad politics for partnership (de Bie, 2020), and role of partnership in racial justice/anti-racism practices (Fraser & Usman, 2021). By expanding how and where partnership can take place, opportunities for engagement can continue to extend to students from equity-seeking cohorts who have been traditionally underserved by educational systems.

Access: student representation

Student representatives tend to be elected by peers or selected through invitation by staff. University-wide student representatives are elected by the university-wide student body following a process of campaigning. For example, students within a political party (or with a political affiliation) vote to decide which members will run in a campaign (e.g., for student president), and then the student body votes to elect student representatives (Cornelius-Bell, 2021; Klemenčič, 2012a). Depending on the university context, sometimes various positions for student representatives have separate campaigns and therefore allow for multiple parties to get elected, while others have the winner of the presidential campaign then appoint the other representatives. For example, in the context of Uganda, Mugume and Luescher (2015) reported that the students elected the guild president annually (with one candidate from each party running) and the president who is elected then selects 28 of their peers to serve as ministers. The elected party then is 'formally responsible for articulating and intermediating the interests of students within the institution, in university governance committees, and nationally' (ibid, p.158). It is through appointing students where considerations of equity and inclusion can be addressed (e.g., inclusion portfolio or minister for disability). Klemenčič (2012a) underscored the gravity of which students get to serve noting:

> These associations typically also have the exclusive right to nominate their representatives to the permanent governmental consultative structures and are invited to participate in ad hoc working parties. Hence, such organisations not only possess significant legitimatory resources and formal channels of influence, but typically also sustained financing and well-established institutional structures. (p.11)

Mugume and Luescher (2017) also found that most student representatives have political party affiliation, with three in five students belonging to one of the national political parties. If the student representative is politically affiliated, they may see their role as predominantly representing the political party and linking to the agenda of that party, rather than protecting the interests of their peers (Cornelius-Bell, 2021). However, there are student representatives not involved in student unions.

There is a system of participation where students act as speakers for student cohorts (e.g. subject representative, working group members, student members of selection panel) or liaisons between student cohorts and disciplinary or management groups (e.g., chemistry student-faculty liaison committee, advisory group members giving feedback on a specific project) that is part of what Flint and Goddard (2020) labelled student academic representation systems. For example, Kapadia (2021) reflected on her experience as a member of academic representation network for medical students in a London, UK university, and how being in that network resulted in several personal invitations to join working groups or projects, which 'perhaps would not have happened if not for my role as a rep.' Thus, being elected by her disciplinary cohort to a Student-Staff Liaison Group (SSLGs) resulted in being selected for additional opportunities—opportunities to advocate for a better student experience for her cohort without mention of politics.

Some student representatives are not selected or elected by students, but rather are appointed by staff. For example, in Australia, Tolli and Dollinger (2021) described an approach whereby student representatives to discipline-based advisory groups are selected by central staff (not affiliated with a discipline or academic unit) following an application process and consideration of equity and inclusion. Importantly, how student

representatives are selected has consequences not only in the way in which students see their role, but which students get to benefit from the perceived benefits of having such a role, including networking, building skills, and even improving prospects of future employment (Kapadia, 2021).

Discussing access in student partnership and student representation

Student representation by design is selective and exclusive. Through student unionism, students have the authority to elect the students who will speak to the interest of the student body in formal governance structures. As Jasmine Xu (in Holdsworth, 2021) lamented, there will be students keen to be involved who will not get elected, and that is par for the course. That the highly engaged students participate in elected and selected systems of student representation is assumed. The skillset student representatives possess also matters as Meeuwissen and co-authors (2019, p.671) in the Netherlands found that representatives with 'a proactive and critical attitude, particularly those who had a long-term perspective were seen as the ones who fared best…' While student partners engage in ongoing communication and navigate forms of hierarchical power dynamics, being able to capture data and report in formal committees is rarely a requirement. Instead, student partners with particular knowledge of a subject (prior completion of a subject to be re-designed) or who bring a unique lived experience (first in family student in pedagogical partnership to enhance inclusive practices) could be the basis for selection. The context of student partnership enables broader inclusion of students with a clear commitment in the scholarly literature for partnership with students who have been least well-served in educational systems and therefore less likely to participate in partnership activities.

Yet, access to student partnership and student representation can be limited by staff gatekeepers when student representatives are not elected by students and when student partnership is enacted as an out-of-class project-based model. The power that rests in the decision to select who is a student partner has come into question by scholars (Kehler, Verwoord, & Smith, 2017; Yahlnaaw, 2019). Opportunities for students to initiate and invite staff partners in project-based partnership programs are one response to the question of who has the power to select whom. However, *elected* student representatives versus *selected by staff* student representatives who sit on university decision-making committees raise complex questions that we have yet to see taken up seriously in the literature, although Holen and co-authored (2021, pgs. 10–11) recently called for further research answering the question, 'do partnership models based on democratic ideals run the danger of pushing students into being political followers?' where political followership involves staff selecting students.

Discussion

While both student representation and student partnership are a means of realising the aspiration of student voice in higher education, they differ and the difference matters. There have been many calls for student representation to be enacted as student partnership, or student representation and student partnership being used interchangeably as if they are fungible. For example, Williamson (2013, p. 8) in Scotland explained:

> [Partnership] goes far beyond the mere consultation, involvement, or representation of students in decision-making. Where partnership exists, students not only identify

areas for enhancement, but they help to identify ways to carry out that enhancement, as well as helping to facilitate implementation where possible.

In another example, Student Voice Australia (SVA, n.d.) described their organisation as being 'committed to facilitating authentic student engagement through partnership in institutional decision-making and governance for learning, teaching and the student experience'. The underlying intention in comparing or interchanging representation and partnership is to assert authority for students in the university where they are taken seriously and can be a part of decisions that impact them. The currency of the term partnership seemingly has more weight as a source of student agency—of students in governance seeking the legitimacy, respect, and power evoked in partnership. Holdsworth (2021, p. 9) noted the hollowness of student representation (in the school sector following decades of research and practice) by commenting that it has:

> enabled many schools and systems to focus only on students' advocacy - students putting forward their ideas and views - in a way that creates little or no shift to power relationships or to practices. It is so easy to say we're listening to or amplifying student voices - or to focus on 'improving' students' voices - while ignoring them in reality - or ignoring some voices.

That student representatives want to be taken seriously, and in a position to take meaningful action, is understandable. As Freeman (2016, p. 860) found in a study with UK student representations, '…you have the power to say this is an issue, but you don't have the power to do anything about it yourself'. The ethos of student partnership that enables ongoing dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility that foster trusting relationships between students and teachers, university leadership, and administrative staff has deep appeal for student representatives. Yet, the context of student representation in a highly structured and formalised governance process presents obstacles to the context of partnership where 'learning together and dialogue' are called-for mindsets. The opportunities to understand how student representation in formalised governance and decision-making structures can unfold through the values of partnership are manifold for researchers. In doing so, well-articulated conceptualisations of partnership and representation combined with critical attention to student voice would benefit such research processes.

Criticality that surfaces the underpinning motivations for representation to a partnership, for partnership to come into the arena of student representation, is warranted. Molesworth et al., (2011, p. 172) cautioned that universities encourage students to share their voices through a consumerist lens with the growing expectation to complete evaluation forms or sit on liaison committees as evidence of universities being driven by the 'creation of satisfied consumers'. Indeed, in a study of students and staff involved in partnership across 11 Australian universities, the idea of being partners was identified as a counter-narrative to students as customers rhetoric, which appealed to and motivated participants while raising concerns about the appropriation of partnership for neoliberal ends (Matthews, Cook-Sather, et al., 2018; Matthews, Dwyer, et al., 2018). The risks of confounding of student representation and student partnership, including appropriation or lack of appreciation for the important differences, are complex and consequential.

Examining the discourses of responsibility and access in recent literature demonstrates the qualitative variation in how each is conceptualised, discussed, and debated. The obvious difference is the context of representation (formalised governance at strategic policy level), and partnership (everyday, informal educational practices) means that students navigate different roles (responsibilities) as representatives versus partners. And the access to

being a student representative will be limited to a handful of students, while the possibility of broader access to partnership is a live topic of debate and consideration amongst scholars. Confounding student representation and student partnership is troublesome for many reasons, two of which we discuss now and through the lens of student voice.

First, the potential for student partners to speak for and as themselves, to have their unique voices recognised in conversation about teaching and learning, is diminished when they are perceived and received by university staff as representing (or speaking for) other students. The harm of student partnership being conflated as a form of student representation occurs in reducing the humanising ethos of student partnership as a relational pedagogy that values difference and works through dialogic processes connecting students and teachers (Bovill, 2020). Cook-Sather and Graham (in press) make this clear in asserting that student partnership means 'not assuming that any individual student perspective is representative of all but rather embracing differences as sources of insight', which is of particular importance for students historically unheard and underserved in educational systems.

Second, the importance of student representatives being elected by students, as opposed to selected by staff, is diminished when student partnership is seen as being superior or interchangeable with systems of elected student representation. Holen and co-authors (2021) articulated how internal and external pressures motivating student participation can lead to forms of student representation grounded in a democratic stance (internal) that advocates elected students and forms of followership participation (external) initiated by university leadership. Our analysis of access to student representation, particularly when framed as a form of partnership, signals a move away from elected students on committees toward staff-selected students. Holen and collaborators (2021) called for further research about democratic forms of partnership moving toward a followership model. Extending that call, we offer a question to guide research: how might conflating student partnership and student representation undermine systems of elected student representation?

By focusing on only student representation and student partnership with the aim of distinguishing them, the fuzzy and middle ground between them was not the focus. This presents an opportunity for researchers to further conceptual clarity in the name of student voice in higher education. Furthermore, systematic reviews of literature and research capturing the lived experiences of students can extend collective scholarly understanding. While bringing together two sets of literatures presents challenges, doing so works against increasingly fragmented research in higher education (Matthews et al, 2021) while allowing scholars to stand back, engage more critically with discourses, and map systematically at intersections of literatures.

Conclusion

By confounding and conflating student representation and student partnership, important questions of who students can be speaking for and about, and the legitimacy of them doing so, are disregarded to the detriment of student voice more broadly in higher education. By recognising the important differences between, and valuable roles of both, student representation and student partnership, they can work together across the strategic and everyday levels shaping educational life for students. Ultimately, a culture of student voice is more likely to be realised when students see that they can actively shape and participate in their everyday educational experiences and that elected student representatives are taken

seriously in formalised governance structures of the institution. And doing so, as Holdsworth (2021) and many others advocate, involves a willingness to shift power relationships and practices by taking seriously the contributions of students in all roles in all spaces and places where learning, teaching, assessment, student life, and decision about such activities unfold.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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